

# 2.1. Republican Utopia in Antonio Brucioli's *Dialogi* (1526–1544)

Francesca Russo

## **Abstract**

Antonio Brucioli is among the most enigmatic and important characters in Florentine Renaissance culture. He lived a very particular life. In the first phase, he was a brave republican fighting against the Medici's political order, and a religious dissenter asserting his full freedom of conscience and professing his faith. In the second period of his life, after his exile from Florence, he became a spy for Cosimo de' Medici. He repudiated his earlier political ideas and even, in the last years of his life, his heretical beliefs, or at least he pretended to. His main work, the *Dialogi*, written between 1526 and 1544, was deeply influenced by his attitudes at the time of each edition. It is an interesting and complex work, covering many areas of knowledge, and one of the greatest masterpieces of Florentine Renaissance culture. The main aim of my contribution is to underline the model of the perfect republic as explained by the author, and to point out its evolution through the editions of Brucioli's work. I aim to show how the author followed both the teachings of Niccolò Machiavelli and readings of Thomas More's *Utopia*.

**Key words:** Florentine republicanism, Brucioli, perfect society, Niccolò Machiavelli, Thomas More

Antonio Brucioli is among the most prominent enigmatic and relevant characters in Florentine Renaissance culture. His life could be divided into at least two phases. In the first phase, we can describe him as a brave republican supporter and as a religious dissenter. After his exile from Florence, he became a spy for the Grand Duke of Tuscany Cosimo de' Medici. He denied his political ideas and in the last years of his life, he even disavowed his heretical beliefs, or pretended to.

Brucioli's main work, the *Dialogi*, written between 1526 and 1544, is deeply influenced by the author's attitudes at the time of each edition (Brucioli, 1982). Nevertheless, the *Dialogi della morale philosophia* comprise a fascinating and complex series of works, covering many areas of knowledge, from philosophy to

religion, to politics, to physics, to cosmography. For their literary style and content, they can be considered one of the masterpieces of Florentine Renaissance culture (Russo, 2016a).

Among the most notable historians of Brucioli's life and dialogues are Delio Cantimori, Carlo Dionisotti, Giuliano Procacci, Felix Gilbert, Ugo Rozzo, Paolo Simoncelli, Andrea Del Col, and Élise Boillet. Giorgio Spini wrote an important biography (Spini, 1940) and Aldo Landi edited the critical edition of the *Dialogi* (Brucioli, 1982). One of the main reasons for the importance of the *Dialogi*, apart from their literary value, is that they represent an important historical witness of the debates that took place in the cultural milieu of the Giardino degli Orti Oricellari (Rucellai Gardens) (Cambiano, 2000: 118–20). Brucioli took part in these meetings. His cultural background was deeply connected to that fascinating experience. In his youth, he was a convinced republican and a free spirit. Then, for personal economic reasons, he became a spy for the Medici government. Having suffered several interrogations by the Inquisition, he became more inclined to align with the Catholic faith, or at least, he tried to hide his religious ideas.

The editions of the *Dialogi* show changes in Brucioli's religious perspective and evidence of discussions in the Rucellai Gardens about the model of a perfect republic. Despite this, the author's fundamental aim to establish free republican institutions persists throughout. The real spirit of the Rucellai Gardens reunions is more evident and disclosed in the first version of the *Dialogi*, although the author never abandoned his intellectual ties with the cultural world of his youth (Russo, 2016a).

Brucioli (1487–1566) came from a middle-class family and received a humanistic education at the Studio Fiorentino, as one can learn from his *Dialogi* (Brucioli, 1982: 553). In the first edition of his works, there are interesting references to the teachings learnt there, and some of his former professors are main characters of the *Dialogi*. Brucioli had a profound knowledge of ancient Greek philosophy, Plato, and of Florentine neo-Platonism, which was his time's main philosophical trend, but he was also familiar with Aristotle's teachings (Dionisotti, 1980: 202–3). Aristotle's thought is a fundamental source for understanding Brucioli's ideas. The Florentine author had learned Aristotelian philosophy through the teachings of Francesco Cattani da Diacceto. Cattani deeply influenced Brucioli. In my book, *Donato Giannotti pensatore politico Europeo*, I studied the role played by the 1528 and 1529 editions of Brucioli's *Dialogi* in recreating the cultural debates that occurred in Florence (Russo, 2016b). In the thirteenth dialogue on the beginning of the world, the main topic is a debate about the Aristotelian theory of the eternity of the world, widely discussed in Diacceto's school. Giannotti and Ristoro Serristori, Diacceto's students, widely discussed Aristotelian theory and its various interpretations, wishing to deny any charge for heresy for this doctrine, as

Aristotelian theory had been condemned in Florence by Girolamo Savonarola and by the Fifth Lateran Council in 1513.

The main feature of Diacceto's school was to point out the importance of Aristotle's philosophy, and blend it with the neo-platonic Florentine tradition (Kristeller, 1956; Garin, 1978). Diacceto rediscovered Aristotelian philosophy in a "modern" way, spreading again the knowledge of this fundamental author in the Florentine milieu, and connecting his philosophy with Platonism and the Hellenic cultural tradition. Benedetto Varchi praised the role played by Diacceto's school in Florentine humanistic society. He underlined the importance of Diacceto's teachings and the main role covered by Brucioli's dialogues as a witness of his master's leanings. In his *Vita del Diacceto*, published in 1561, Varchi highlighted that Brucioli's utopia of a perfect republic refers to the Aristotelian model of a mixed constitution, as taught by Diacceto (Varchi, 1561).

Before briefly presenting Brucioli's idea of the perfect republic from the 1526 edition of the *Dialogi* (he amended it in the later editions of 1538 and 1544), it is important to know that his idea of a republic was influenced not only by Aristotle's thought, which he learned through Diacceto's teachings, but most of all by Machiavelli (Dionisotti, 1980). Brucioli was present in the Rucellai Gardens in 1516, when Machiavelli read out his *Discourses on Livy* at the invitation of Cosimo Rucellai. In this work, he celebrated the history of the Roman Republic, considered the best model of government. Rome had been the perfect republic because it had a mixed constitution, a different mix from the Aristotelian model, but ideally connected to it. The mix of the three elements (monarchy, aristocracy, and democracy) was unequal: the monarchical and aristocratic elements were represented in the Roman constitution, but the main importance was given to the democratic institution, which represented the idea of freedom of people, and the caretaker of the republic's survival.

Brucioli and his young friends were fascinated by Machiavelli's teachings, and they dreamt of the idea of building this model of ideal republic in Florence. In 1522, they organized a conspiracy against Cardinal Giulio de' Medici. It failed. Machiavelli denied right away his involvement in this plan. Brucioli narrowly succeeded in saving his life, but he was compelled to escape Florence, together with Jacopo Nardi, Luigi Alamanni, and Zanobi Buondelmonti. They were all formally banished from Florence (Russo, 2008). Brucioli went into exile, to Lyon, in France, where there was a huge community of Florentines. Many Florentines had converted to Lutheranism. Brucioli likely started his conversion to Protestantism in Lyon. He moved to Paris and then to the German States, where he lived for a long time. There his Protestant choice became stable in his conscience. He improved his connections with the German reformers (Spini, 1940).

He succeeded afterwards in returning to the Italian peninsula, to Venice, which was to become his new homeland. Venice was one of the most important cultural centres. It was a free republic or, perhaps, a “free oligarchy”, as Machiavelli called it, with a lasting tradition of reception for people coming from several parts of the world. The “Serenissima” represented one of the main hopes for Italian political and even religious dissenters. Brucioli belonged to both categories. Venice was the best place for him to settle in the peninsula. It was furthermore an important publishing centre, and he gave his works to the press.

The first edition of the *Dialogi* was published in Venice in 1526 by the editor Gregorio de’Gregori. The work is dedicated to Massimiliano Sforza. The fifth dialogue is devoted to the theme of the ideal republic. Brucioli presents his “first” project for an ideal republic using the humanist pattern of a discussion between several speakers. It is informed by the Rucellai Gardens debates, where Diacceto’s cultural heritage and Machiavelli’s teachings were combined in an original and sharp synthesis. Procacci describes Brucioli’s utopia as similar to the free German cities where the author had lived at the beginning of his exile, with some traits of the ancient Greek *polis* described by Aristotle. Nevertheless, Procacci observes that the two main examples of Brucioli’s imaginary republic are the Roman Republic as illustrated by Machiavelli in *Discourses on Livy* and contemporary Venice (Procacci, 1965: 29–43). Brucioli was strongly affected by a fascination for his new homeland, but he never forgot his former teachers and his old patria of Florence.

The characters involved in the discussion about the model of the ideal republic in the fifth book of Brucioli’s 1526 *Dialogi* are imaginary.<sup>1</sup> The main issue of the dialogue is how to settle and lay out a free republic based on the principles of justice and equality. It is important to explain how to make the republic last despite all the internal and external dangers. The perfect republic is, according to Brucioli, settled on an island, Matthien. In the description of the island are references to Thomas More’s *Utopia*, which had been printed in Florence in 1519. This is very likely the first witness to a knowledge of More’s masterpiece on the Italian peninsula. In the whole dialogue, there is also an important debate about the activities which are necessary for the republic. Following the Venetian example, it is underlined that trade is the most important activity in the community, and that people living within the borders of the island should be converted most of all into merchants. There is also an interesting discussion about war. The Machiavellian idea of a “militia” prevails. The discussants decide that is important to banish violence and civil war from within the borders the republic, but to keep an army ready, not to wage external wars but to repel an external assault. The free and equal institutions of the ideal republic must be saved by their own citizens.

In editions of the *Dialogi* in 1537 and 1538, the utopia of the perfect republic is kept in the text, but there are some changes. These modifications are connected to Brucioli's new political attitude and life. He lived calmly for a short while, returning to Florence after the republican restoration in 1527. However, he was banished again from his homeland by his Republican friends for openly professing his Lutheran heresy and his stated intention to attack the San Marco cloister, where Savonarola's followers lived. In 1530, the Florentine republic fell under the assault of Habsburg troops, and the Medici were restored to government. The only hope for the restoration of the republic was created in 1537 by the sudden and unexpected gesture of Lorenzino de'Medici, who killed the illegitimate and authoritarian duke of Florence, Alessandro de'Medici. The final attack on the Medici republican faction took place some months later in Montemurlo. It ended with the final defeat of the republicans (Russo, 2008). Afterwards, there was no chance of restoring free institutions in Florence. The republic became a nostalgic memory. Cosimo de'Medici was ensconced in Florence. During this time, Brucioli kept away from the fight for freedom. He had hoped for the return of the republic. He remained openly a republican, living in exile in Venice, but he secretly became a spy for Cosimo de'Medici to better his poor conditions of life.

The editions of his *Dialogi* written after 1537 are affected by Brucioli's new attitude and his continuous search for new protectors, which is disclosed in the editions' dedications. Nonetheless, Brucioli did not renounce his utopia of the perfect republic in the edition of 1538, nor in the last edition of 1544. There are significant changes, by comparison with the version of 1526. The names of the characters are different. They are living persons and important intellectuals of the time. The most important in the edition published in Venice by Bartolomeo Zanetti in 1538 is Niccolò Machiavelli.

The final version of the *Dialogi* was printed by Antonio Brucioli himself in Venice in 1544, in the publishing house established by his brothers Francesco and Alessandro. The theme of the ideal republic remains, but it is described differently from the first edition. The work is devoted to Ottaviano de'Medici, and his family is fully praised. However, there are signs that Brucioli continued to be a covert follower of Machiavellian teachings on republicanism, even while a servant to the Medici family. For example, he leaves behind utopian references. The ideal republic is no longer on the island of Mathien. Thomas More is indirectly quoted and even criticized for his preference for the common ownership of goods and his extreme notion of equality. The speakers taking part in the dialogue on the perfect republic changed completely from the one described in 1526. In the edition published in 1544 the debate develops between Machiavelli, Bernardo Salviati, Giangiacomo Leonardi from Pesaro, and Giangiorgio Trissino. They were all real persons known by the author. Trissino is the main character. He describes the perfect model of

republic, answering the question asked by the others. Machiavelli asks the most important questions about the institutional model of the perfect republic, which should be “ideal” but also “real”, in the sense that this model should have a possibility of becoming true. The ideal republic described by Trissino is very close to the one Machiavelli presented in the *Discourses on Livy*. It should be a free community based on fully enjoyed liberty, and values of justice, good laws, good habits, and a good “civil” religion. There should be an army of citizens. The republic is organized into several institutions and equipped with a large assembly that elects all the magistracies. All citizens should be involved in political life. From an economic point of view, the republic should be self-sufficient, so a good division of labour is needed. From a geographical point of view, it is underlined that it would be better if the republic were located where it is difficult to reach by its enemies. It would also be better nearer the sea, where winds blowing from the north are stronger because these winds make men braver.

In my opinion, Brucioli’s 1544 description of the ideal republic is more connected to his past as a Republican supporter and his passion for the republican model of Machiavelli’s *Discourses on Livy* than to the utopian tradition. In 1526 Brucioli was perhaps affected by the novelty of More’s *Utopia*. In 1544, even though he was a spy and a servant of Cosimo de’Medici, he was still fascinated by republicanism, and his model of the ideal republic is closer to Machiavelli’s *Discourses on Livy* than to More’s *Utopia*.

## Note

1. The fictional characters are Theophane, Phalerio, Cratippo, Theone, and Carmene.

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